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ABSTRACT

A new teacher appraisal process involving 5 competencies and 163 indicators has been devised by the Provincial Government of Ontario, Canada. Principals are being held responsible for the appraisals, and the competencies and indicators are being imposed on professional practice. This paper suggests that a better approach to professional growth could be developed within the structure of the imposed approach by focusing on the values-based desires of educators to influence improvements in students' learning. The approach is focused on the embodies knowledge carried in what teachers are doing as educators. It assumes that each can make a contribution to the professional knowledge base by creating his or her own living educational theory in inquiries of this kind: "How can I improve my practice here?" (J. Whitehead, 1989). It includes the embodies values of educators, the capacity for knowledge-creation in a cyclic, self-reflection model of action research, and personal responsibility for professional growth. (Contains 29 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Action Research and Teacher Performance Appraisal

Cheryl Black

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As an elementary school principal, how can I improve my ability to entice engagement of teachers, in my school, in the action research process as a means of providing evidence of their professional growth and improved student learning while continuing to support them as they struggle with their frustrations and successes?

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Abstract
A new teacher appraisal process involving 5 competencies and 163 indicators has been devised by the Provincial Government in Ontario, Canada. Principals are held responsible for the appraisals. The competencies and indicators are being imposed on our professional practice and development. This paper suggests that a better approach to professional growth could be developed within the structure of the imposed approach by focusing on the values-based desires of educators to influence improvements in students' learning. The approach is focused on the embodied knowledge we carry in what we are doing as educators. It assumes that each one of us can make a contribution to our professional knowledge base by creating our own living educational theory in inquiries of the kind, "How can I improve my practice here?" (Whitehead, 1989). It includes our embodied values, our capacity for knowledge-creation in a cyclic, self-reflection model of action research and our personal responsibility for our professional growth.

Introduction

As a new principal, experienced in an action research approach to generating and testing my own living theory of my educational influence and professional growth (Black, 2001) I describe my research to determine the most effective action plan to encourage teachers in my school to begin to investigate their own practice. The process of choosing my action plan is part of this study. I will explain the context in which we are working and my reasons for believing in the action research process. As I have planned an approach with the teachers at my school, I have considered the benefits and barriers inherent in teachers researching their practice. I will also explain my past experiences and the recent

data I have collected to help me plan this approach. My intention is to research my own practice alongside the teachers as we work to support the students in improving their learning. I will draw attention to the evidence that gives me hope that such an inquiry into professional growth can add to the professional knowledge base through the creation and testing of our shared living educational theories.

Provincial Context

Six years ago, the Ministry of Education in Ontario created a standardized test for all Grade 3 students in the province to evaluate the success of students reaching an accepted level of achievement in the New Ontario Curriculum (1997). Shortly afterward, another test was devised for Grade 6 and most recently, a mathematics test for Grade 9 students and a literacy test for students in Grade 10. An inability to achieve a passing grade on the Grade 10 test would result in the student not receiving a graduation diploma but rather a "Certificate of Completion". Based on the results, school boards must now produce predictions for the improvements in the Reading scores for Grade 3 students. Schools must each produce a plan for improvement based on analysis of their respective scores in partnership with parents and teachers.

While the Educational Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) was implementing province-wide testing, the newly-formed College of Teachers, in consultation with educators across the province, was creating Standards of Practice (1999) for the teaching profession. The standards are divided into five competencies:

- Commitment to Students and Student Learning
- Professional Knowledge
- Teaching Practice
- Leadership and Community
- Ongoing Professional Learning

Based on the Standards of Practice (SOP), the Ministry of Education has released a document entitled, "Supporting Teaching Excellence (2002)". This document is a new teacher performance appraisal system created in the hopes of improving the quality of teaching and by extension, student learning. For each of the five competencies, a list of performance indicators has been created, commonly known as 'look-fors'. These are active observations the evaluator (mandated to be the principal or vice principal) may make in the classroom of the teacher under appraisal. In total, 163 indicators have been created and grouped under the five competencies. In preparation for the classroom observation, the teacher and the principal must have a pre-observation meeting to outline which of the competencies will be a focus for the lesson. During the observation, the principal may use a checklist to record which of the 'look-fors' are evident. After the lesson, the principal and the teacher must have a post-observation meeting to consider whether or not the teacher was effective in exemplifying the expected 'look-fors'. After the discussion, a summative report must be completed and filed with the school board's human resources department. After a suitable time has elapsed within the same school year, the process must be repeated.

There are drawbacks to the appraisal system. It is very difficult to show evidence of all 163 items on the checklist in only two classroom visits. Although more visits are possible, time is a factor. Also, there are some competencies, such as leadership and collaboration, which are more difficult for new teachers to show. The complete process is very time-consuming for teachers and administrators. Also, the administrator is evaluating the teacher's performance through the lens of his/her own values and experience, which may not necessarily match those of the teacher being observed.

Another aspect of the appraisal process is an "Annual Learning Plan" (p. 18) which each teacher must complete every September. This is intended to address "the teacher's own professional growth (p. 18)". A plan must be written every year, not only in a teacher's performance appraisal year. This plan must include "the teacher's professional growth objectives, as well as his or her proposed action plan and time lines for achieving those objectives (p. 18)".

The College of Teachers was created to monitor the professional conduct of its members. The professional growth aspect will be monitored through a "Professional Learning Plan" (2001) in which each educator--teachers, consultants, principals and superintendents—must give evidence of professional growth in seven areas of professional expertise over five years. Attendance at conferences or workshops, publications, presentations, summer institutes (mini-courses offered by school boards), and additional qualification courses are a few of the accepted professional growth activities. The federations (unions) representing both elementary and secondary teachers, have advised their

members to boycott any activities for which Professional Learning Plan credits are offered but to begin building a professional portfolio of workshops attended and articles they have published. Their belief is that teachers are professionals and therefore able to be responsible for their own professional growth making the monitoring by a governing body, unnecessary.

Local Context

In the Grand Erie District School Board, one superintendent, Dr. Jacqueline Delong, with the support of our Director of Education, Peter Moffatt, has been instrumental in creating a culture of inquiry. Teachers have been encouraged to investigate their own professional practice and to share their learning with others. Using the cyclical self-study model of action research (McNiff, Lomax, Whitehead, 1996), teachers have created research questions based on the stem, "How can I improve the quality of my practice here?" (Whitehead, 1989). Over the last six years, many have presented their knowledge at local and international conferences, such as the Ontario Educational Research Council (OERC), and have had their accounts published in numerous journals and books, such as Passion in Professional Practice Volumes I and II available at: www.actionresearch.ca, as well as online in the Ontario Action Researcher at: www.unipissing/oar

Personal Context: Reason for Concern

Personally, I have been supported in researching my practice, initially as a teacher investigating my classroom practice, and more recently, as a vice principal investigating my practice which was accredited in my Masters of

Education degree. My experience in the process has led me to agree with Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) that "teachers learn when they generate local knowledge *of* practice by working within the contexts of inquiry communities to theorize and construct their work" (p. 250).

Lately, I have been in the position of supporting practitioner-researchers at monthly meetings. These are teachers who have responded to an invitation so are attending the meetings because they are interested in learning about the action research process. Seeing and hearing the frustration and excitement as group members describe their observations and reflections, has increased my belief in the process. My experience with the process has led me to believe that the complexity of the previously described teacher appraisal process and its component parts—the annual learning plan and the professional learning plan—could be greatly simplified if teachers would undertake to research their own practice.

Increased accountability for improved student learning, the time involved with the Teacher Performance Appraisal, and my experience in action research, has impacted my decision to investigate the benefits and barriers of using action research to positively affect a school culture with the aim of improving student learning. I believe that encouraging teachers to investigate their own practice will have a positive impact on the school and reduce the time necessary to do an appropriate performance review of a teacher. Encouraging them to take responsibility for their professional learning will empower them to make changes

that they deem necessary in their practice, rather than imposing changes from above.

As principal, it is my responsibility to ensure that teachers consider ways of improving their teaching practices so our school meets projected target scores on the EQAO test and that our school results improve. The means of encouraging that professional growth is, to a large extent, being imposed from above with the Teacher Performance Appraisal and the Professional Learning Plan. Day (2000) states that "there exists a literature on the professionalism of teachers and what this means for the effective learning and achievement of students" (p. 114). However, "the 'professionalism' of school principals themselves has not been identified as an area worthy of investigation, perhaps on the assumption that it is no different from teachers' professionalism" (p. 114). There are minimal differences. Treating teachers as valued professionals, capable of taking responsibility for their own professional growth is similar to treating students with respect, however, sometimes adults have forgotten the ability to take risks and reflect on their practice.

As an experienced facilitator, I have noticed some barriers which affect the ability of teachers to systematically investigate their practice. While many teachers engage in some informal reflection on a daily basis, the reflection and recording of data involved, in systematically researching their practice, is not natural for them. A lack of time and a belief in the uniqueness of their classroom practice, sustained support and a fear of the mystique surrounding the word 'research' that harkens back to experience with quantitative research and the

inherent demands of analysis, are all reasons that teachers do not, naturally, research their practice. Johnston(1994) agrees. She referenced Carr & Kemmis (1986) as they "highlighted how the institutional separation of educational research and practice provides a barrier to action research" (42). They also "maintained that the absence of critical inquiry approaches in both educational research and practice has presented further barriers" (42). Another barrier is the "logical and systematic approach (42)" of action research, which implies its imposition on "classroom practitioners to remedy their perceived shortcomings (42)." Johnston (1994) also mentions lack of time for collaborative meetings and a lack of confidence regarding appropriate research skills necessary to their involvement (42). With all of these concerns, it is understandable why Snow (2001) believes that "currently available procedures for systematizing personal knowledge and analysis of personal knowledge into publicly accessible knowledge are inadequate" (p. 4). The procedures are there, however, the lack of sustained support, the lack of credence granted to teacher research, and the shortage of opportunities for teachers to publish, result in a very slow growth of the knowledge base of practitioner research.

Dadds (2002) and Kember (2002) both mention "ownership" of the teacher's project to be a critical issue. Dadds and her research partner realized that the teachers they were facilitating "had found it difficult to engage with the analysis and theory that had excited us because it was ours and not theirs" (p. 5). Kember (2002) states that "the quality mechanism can be open issues of interest or concern to the teachers themselves" (p. 85). Hiebert, Gallimore and Stigler

(2002) believe "the observations and replications of teachers in the schools would become a common pathway through which promising ideas were tested and refined before they found their way into the nation's classrooms" (p. 12). While ownership is important, replicability is not always possible or necessary. "Generalizability is virtually impossible when one considers the myriad of variables within the context of the classroom. No two groups of children, no two teachers, no two classroom dynamics or contexts are the same" (Black, Delong & Whitehead, 2003). Some transference from context to context is possible, but teachers know their students and their classroom dynamics, best. Adding the criteria of replicability to teacher research, may negatively impact the benefits of 'owning' their own knowledge and improvement of student learning.

The perceived rigor and credibility of teacher research is another barrier. Noffke & Zeichner (2001) outline three criticisms that have been directed at the idea of teacher research. The first being that "teachers are not properly trained to conduct research and...the research they have conducted has not been up to an acceptable standard"(p. 298). The second criticism is that "practitioner research is of questionable value because many studies do not involve the investigation of groups that are representative of larger populations" (p. 299) therefore, generalizability is a concern. The third criticism that they gleaned from the literature is that of teachers finding the time in their day to conduct the research and not detract from their most important task, teaching children. (p. 299)

While I have seen the benefits of teachers researching their own practice and trust it is a viable way of improving student learning and affecting school improvement, the list of barriers concern me. As I have met with groups of teacher researchers at monthly meetings, I have discovered another barrier for which I have not yet discovered a reason. That problem is that not everyone finishes and writes about their research.

Many people come to the meetings, but not everyone writes a finished account of their learning, resulting student learning, and their personal and professional growth. Without that step, sharing with colleagues is virtually impossible because the accreditation of a completed and published work helps add credence to the professional learning in the view of the Ontario College of Teachers. I also, have experienced the increased depth of reflection and analysis as I prepared to write about my research near the end of a school year. As a facilitator, it is difficult to judge when people need space to work at their own speed or when they need pressure to complete the final documentation of their learning (Black & Knill-Griesser, 2001). Misjudging can result in non-completion so we are constantly striving to improve our ability to provide sustained support for teachers as they research.

What Works

My experience has shown the following method of introducing the process works well. The initial meeting of a group begins with each person introducing themselves and their current placement. New notebooks of varying description are available and participants are invited to choose one. Everyone present is

asked to write about a recent situation or occurrence which elicited a strong emotion. After a writing period of 4-5 minutes, participants share their stories with a partner and each is asked to help the other pick out the values inherent in the story. By sharing with a partner, the person feels validated and better prepared for the large group presentation. Working around the table, back in the large group, each participant gives a brief synopsis of the story and the group discusses the potential for a research question based on the value inherent in the story

I have started a number of action research network groups like this. One of my first groups was brand new and the potential facilitators were apprehensive. I wrote to the two facilitators after the meeting and told them my goals for the session. I wrote: "my goals (for our initial session) were: to have people write and to have participants leave with a working idea or question" (email dated February 3, 1999). One response stated, "I believe that you were very successful in achieving your goals .....I have to say I am still struggling with my question" (email dated February 4, 1999). This indicated to me that she was planning on being a co-researcher with the people in her group, not an outside facilitator. Also, the "struggling" she was doing regarding her own question, is not a negative thing. There was food for thought initiated in the session and I was pleased with her response. The other facilitator was also positive.

> "I thought the participants were very receptive and seemed quite keen about the whole concept of action research. I think you were able to achieve your goals—as far as I could tell, everyone went away with at least a clearer idea of what their question would be. I think they were also comfortable to share their questions and concerns.....I think you also helped them to clarify the ways in

> which data could be collected in a meaningful way without being too time consuming in their busy schedules. All in all, I thought you did a very good job in leading the group through the pertinent issues and in allowing the group to take the lead in their own direction after you presented ideas for their consideration" (email dated February 5, 1999).

Serendipitously, according to her, I had covered more ground that I had originally hoped. From that group, one member has gone on to a new position in her work and presented and published about her original and subsequent research.

I only attended the initial meeting of that network, but remained in contact with the facilitators by email throughout the process of their group meetings. I have continued to meet with a group in my local area of the district. Every spring, our thoughts turn to the means of attracting new members to the group for fall. Last year, we encouraged group members to each bring a friend to our final celebration of the year. The celebration always involves dinner and either an informal sharing of work completion and potential direction for the next year or, a more formal presentation of a completed project. The personal contact and word of mouth seems to work well at inviting participation and encouraging involvement in a group the following fall. The difficulty arises in increasing the number of teachers involved. The type of reflection necessary in a successful project takes a personal commitment and cannot be imposed from above. Dadds and Hart (2001) agree.

> "Opening one's professional practice to critical scrutiny demands courage, curiosity, fortitude and a willingness to accept that there are always opportunities for further development. It often means that the practitioner researcher renders himself or herself vulnerable to critique, from both self and others. Yet such open attitudes, we believe, signal one of the highest forms of professionalism" (9).

Therefore, a level of trust must be established between the researcher and the facilitator which can only be maintained through personal contact and sustained support (Black and Knill-Griesser, 2001; Delong, 2002). Although this process has worked well in the past, there are still one or two teachers, each year, who do not complete their project. This is the reason for our constant questioning of our practice in facilitating the process and part of my concern in preparing my plan for introducing this plan to my teachers.

Additional Barriers

Taking the risk of introducing the process to the teachers on my staff, involves the barriers above as well as a couple more. I have only been at my current school for a few months and a rejection of the process could negatively impact our new relationships. There is also the implication that encouraging teachers to choose an area of their professional practice to research, that they are lacking in some area. This school contains a strong Federation(union) presence and an underlying aversion to the imposed Professional Learning Plan (PLP).

The Resulting Purpose of My Inquiry

My concern has been the means of encouraging teachers to take the risk of investigating their own practice as a means of fulfilling the component parts of the teacher appraisal process. I believe I could work within the current Teacher Performance Appraisal process to support teacher research projects and the process would be more worthwhile for teachers. Each teacher's annual learning plan would involve determining an initial research question and outlining a

direction for investigating the answers. The professional learning plan would be fulfilled as teachers chose different aspects of their practice to investigate each year, over the five year span of their plan's duration. The principal's observations of the teacher's practice could be that of a critical friend focusing on aspects of the teacher's practice outlined in his/her research, and providing another voice in the validation of the teacher's frustrations or successes. But what are the conditions necessary for teachers to be willing to take the risk of looking at their practice and finding aspects wanting? Isn't it easier to believe that one's practice is 'good enough' and thereby continue along teaching the same lessons in the same way, year after year, regardless of the changing needs of the students? There are two parts to this issue. First, once teachers are interested in researching their practice, it is important that they are supported and guided in the process. However, the second part and one more difficult to determine, is that of the qualities or conditions necessary for teachers to be persuaded to take a risk and research their practice. Hence, my research question became:

As an elementary school principal, how can I improve my ability to entice engagement of teachers, in my school, in the action research process as a means of providing evidence of their professional growth and improved student learning while continuing to support them as they struggle with their frustrations and successes?

Of the many types and definitions of action research available, I would like to argue that each teacher must choose to affect their own classroom practice by choosing their own area of research. Smith (2003) has written an exciting

account describing one school's creation of a "shared living educational theory" to improve student learning. However, that connotes an 'all or nothing' process which may mean that some participants could be reluctant and potentially sabotage the improvement effort. I consider this an ideal which may take some time to achieve. My experience and data collection has indicated that involvement by choice results in a greater commitment on the part of the teachers. As mentioned earlier (Dadds & Hart, 2001), the "ownership" of the focus of inquiry is also important to the level of commitment that the study would receive. Blumer (1992) as cited in Sergiovanni (1994) states,

> "much of what passes for school reform is superficial and ultimately fails because the difficulty of the task—institutional change—is underestimated. Real change can only come as a result of the commitments of both the minds and hearts of the total school community—teachers, parents, students, administrators and school boards. Reform should be based on careful identification of deeply and commonly held values. Change can only be achieved through people's acceptance of responsibility to further their goals through their words and their actions" (p. 1).

Any imposed change can result in teachers creating barriers to slow the change process to a more palatable rate but lately, the many changes that have been mandated by the government have created pockets where negative attitudes prevail. Lambert (1998) describes the problem. "Codependency refers to dependence on one another to reinforce immature roles and uses of power and authority. It is an apt term for the entangled, traditional relationships in schools that have kept educators from growing" (p. 93).

NcNiff (2001) describes her "battles for ideas" (p. 3) and how she has tried "to realise [her] educational values in the face of sometimes quite stubborn and entrenched attitudes, and encouraged others to do the same" (p. 3). I can empathize with her battle. As I am struggling to define for myself the role of principal and my impact in my organization, I find myself reflecting on the changes necessary and the best way to encourage the teachers to work with me for the improvement of student learning. McNiff (2001) states it clearly.

> "When I study my work as a manager I am potentially generating my own theory of management. When I study how I work with others in organisational settings, I am potentially generating my own theory of organisation. If I share this theory with others, and they accept it and make it theirs, it becomes our theory and so publicly legitimated; it becomes a publicly acknowledged form of organisation theory....People as they live integrate their theory and practice and give a public account of it; they are their own living theories. In accounting for their own educational process, they generate their living educational theories" (Whitehead, 1993, p. 14-15).

Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1999) remind us that "It has been more or less assumed that teachers who *know* more teach better" (249). However, there must be follow-up to ensure that information gained at workshops and through professional reading, is actually being implemented in the classroom to improve student learning. By choosing the area of focus for their research themselves, information would be sought with a specific purpose in mind, and the chance of that knowledge impacting student learning, would be increased. Also, the data could be collected to show how

the increased knowledge has impacted on the learning of the students in the classroom.

Data Collection

The information needed to answer my question came from a number of sources. Over the past few years, I have collected emails, transcriptions of presentations and personal journal writings to evaluate and improve my ability to support teachers in action research. I have also taped meetings and videotaped myself as I introduced teachers to the process and moderated the ensuing conversations. More recently, my personal journal, conversations with teachers, emails, quotes during presentations, and surveys completed by practitioner researchers will all provide information as to the best way to continue improving my practice.

Action Already Taken

In order to better understand the qualities or conditions necessary for teachers to decide to research their own practice, I hoped to determine why they began the process and followed through to the writing of their own research and, in some cases, the presentation of their learning to colleagues. I surveyed various teachers researchers with whom I have worked in the past. For the purpose of this study, I considered teacher researchers who completed a written account of their research to have been successful in completing a project.

My survey included questions designed to determine why teachers chose to become involved in action research and why they followed through to completion. I sent the survey to every teacher with whom I had worked as I

supported them in their research. I also interviewed teachers as situations arose. Out of twenty-five surveys mailed out, only nine were returned. I did not follow up on the surveys that were not returned because I wanted voluntary replies not coerced responses. My survey contained seven points.

- Briefly outline your teaching experience.
- Briefly outline your research experience
- Why did you become involved in your first research project?
- Would you describe your reason for involvement as an innate desire to improve your own practice or were you encouraged by someone else who felt you had something worth sharing with other teachers?
- Are you currently involved in an action research project? Why or why not?
- How or why did you sustain and/or complete your classroom research?
- Do these questions trigger any other related thoughts that you are comfortable sharing?

I was curious as to whether or not teaching experience affected a willingness to research professional practice. I wondered whether or not, a level of comfort or confidence in one's ability was a condition for engaging in research. I was also interested in the number of teachers who decided to pick a new area for research and continue on in subsequent years. However, realizing now that the personal

contact is vital in helping teachers believe that their knowledge is important, perhaps a personal contact would have produced more completed surveys.

What Did I Discover?

A year ago, my co-chair of our local action research network and I wrote an article about our observations. We wrote,

> "In our experience as facilitators of action research in various settings, we have discovered the necessity for the following common elements: establishing a foundation of trust, providing resources, sharing prior knowledge and experience as we model the process, promoting positive, professional dialogue, and celebrating finished projects with an interactive presentation. The same combination of elements is not always needed in every situation. Navigating the balance between 'leading from beside' (Greenleaf, 1977) and standing back to permit the researcher to 'become autonomous and strive to realise the educative potential within themselves' (Delong in McNiff, 2000, p. 282) requires a strong intuitive sense" (Black and Knill-Griesser, in Delong (ed), 2001, p. 76).

Our own research project was based on improving our process at facilitating the action research process for new teacher researchers and has continued as we co-facilitate each year. The people in our group were voluntary respondents to an invitation sent out the previous June, to every school. I am anticipating that introducing the process to teachers who choose to be present at a meeting is different from introducing the process to a captive audience at a staff meeting where I am principal.

To this point in my research, I have discovered that the literature, my experience and the survey results share two main points in common. One, that personal contact encourages involvement; that a level of trust and/or respect must be established in order for the person to be willing to take the risk to

investigate their own practice. The second point is that sustained support is really important to teachers completing their research projects. My survey results bear that out. Each teacher mentioned at least one person who was instrumental in encouraging them to become involved. A vice principal, a colleague, a consultant, and a principal are examples of the roles represented by the encouraging voice. Another common denominator is that the people encouraging the voice of teachers were not the person who ultimately, guided the research process. Having another person suggest that the 'experiment' being attempted in their classroom is worthy of pursuing in a systematic way and then sharing with others, was key in teachers taking the risk. In my own experience, I believed that the reflection and action that I was doing in my own classroom was the same that every teacher did in their own classroom. I can remember a meeting with action researchers in my area with Jackie Delong as a facilitator and Jack Whitehead visiting. I remember the date because it happened to be my birthday and as I expressed my doubts about my project being no more than normal, good teaching, Jack said, "I have just returned from the International Conference of Teacher Research and while I was there, I did not hear one account of teacher research as exciting as the ideas you are exploring in your classroom" (Journal entry, April 20, 1998). At the same meeting, I was asked to share my project with a school board trustee who was also attending the meeting to learn more about action research. Her enthusiasm and excitement about the improvement in student attitude and confidence that I was striving to achieve,

was very empowering and was instrumental in my subsequent writing and publishing of the account of my research (Black, 1999).

This is an example of the personal contact that is vital for the support of teacher researchers. In McNiff (2001), Delong describes "the nature of [her] influence as an educational leader" (274) in our school district. She has "enabled people to develop their own epistemologies of practice, so that they are able to reflect on their action and show how they have improved the quality of education for themselves and others" (p. 275). "Being an effective leader involves creating, developing and sustaining positive relationships built on trust and respect. A relationship of this kind is earned and requires time together" (p. 275). The relationship between facilitator and researcher can only be enhanced when the facilitator is investigating their own ability to support the teacher and when the relationship is based on mutual respect and reciprocal learning. Whitehead (2001) and Delong (2002) have also discussed their personal influence in supporting teacher research more fully in their respective doctoral inquiries. (Both accounts are available at http://www.actionresearch.net.)

Sustained support was a factor mentioned on the surveys. "Support is the key to continuing formal research" stated one respondent. "New participants need to hear testimonials from seasoned classroom researchers," replied another. "The group meetings are key for encouragement and accountability....The support of experienced researchers is critical to promote growth of the inexperienced," stated a third. One teacher agreed that the support provided at meetings was helpful, "but seeing the dramatic changes in [her]

students caused [her] to keep trying, refining, practicing." Another teacher agreed. He continued his research because "it was successful with students and [he] noticed immediate results. Feedback from students, administration, and parents was so positive."

One respondent summarized, "It is the support from critical friends, the engagement of learning opportunities both individual and collaborative to improve student learning, and the commitment to continued professional growth and lifelong learning that result in the success of the act/reflect/revise cycle of action research." Another commented. "[She] would recommend Action Research to anyone. It forced [her] to take a serious look at [her] practice—to read, to talk to others, to do year-long research on a topic, to see an idea from September through to June. It made [her] a better teacher!"

Next Steps

The next step in the plan is to introduce the process to the teachers in my school at a meeting in late April with the premise that this discussion will help them as they begin thinking about their annual learning plan for September, 2003.. In the past, I have introduced the process many times to teachers who chose to be at meetings either after school, or during school time for which supply teacher coverage was provided. Introducing the process to a 'captive' audience during a staff meeting, may be much more difficult. Johnston (1994) quotes Carr & Kemmis (1986) as acknowledging "the potential for external facilitators of action research to be regarded as manipulators....[and suggest] that all will be well if there is openness within the group about the role of the

facilitator and if power relationships are exposed to critical inquiry"(p. 42-43). I am not an external facilator, but my position could pressure some teachers into making the choice to participate. By explaining that my ability as a principal and facilitator are the basis for my own Ph.D. inquiry and in that capacity, I will be researching my own practice along with them, I hope to alleviate some perceived 'manipulation'. I will be a co-researcher "leading from beside" (Greenleaf, 1977) rather than external to the process and leading from above.

I plan to begin by explaining the stem for their research question then suggest they pair up and discuss an exciting moment which happened in their classroom recently. Using a story or event as an example, we could discuss the values inherent in the story. I would also distribute some recent examples of local teacher research for their perusal and consideration.

I have distributed new hard-cover journals to the teachers on my current staff in preparation for an introduction of the action research process. I have seen time and time again that teachers love receiving new notebooks. The difficulty is in convincing them to write in their notebooks. There is a common belief that their thoughts and observations are not special enough to be written and read. "I'm not doing anything that any other good teacher is not doing" is a common lament heard at monthly network meetings.

Reflections: Acknowledging My Own Process Through the Barriers

Of the concerns and barriers mentioned, some touch me more than others. I believe that improving student learning must come from a personal commitment to research one's professional practice, thus owning the inquiry.

One survey respondent agreed. "[He] learned much from directing [his] own project."To create the culture of inquiry, I must model my willingness to take a risk and research my own professional practice. Improving professional attitudes toward change and taking responsibility for the learning of students would, I hope, result in improved level of conversation around the school as teachers describe their actions and the resulting impact on student learning. Building a setting where calculated risk-taking is encouraged, needs healthy relationships built on trust and respect. However, taking a risk together, and supporting each other through the resulting changes, can in turn, improve the professional relationships in the school.

While writing this paper, I realized that I was hesitant to broach this subject with this group of teachers because I was thinking in an 'all or nothing' mindset. If I encourage them to create a research questions as they write their annual learning plan, I will be satisfied. The method of researching or gaining the knowledge that they feel they lack could vary and I will still have planted the seed of a new means of articulating their area of study. Not all of the teachers have to choose the action research method in order for student learning to improve, although, I do believe in the positive impact of teachers systematically reflecting on and investigating their practice.

My hesitancy in taking the risk is based on a couple of issues. First, the fact that the teachers are a 'captive audience' as their attendance at a staff meeting is mandatory and in the past I have only worked with teachers who chose to be there. Second, I am uncertain as to their reception of the process.

Recent initiatives have meant that teachers have been exposed to a large number of new documents written to help them improve student learning, specifically in Literacy and Mathematical literacy. As a consequence, the perception of one more new idea may overload their capacity for change.

I also hope that my position as principal will not pressure them into engaging in research unless they feel they are truly interested in the process. If I were to mandate the action research process for their annual learning plan, I would be using the power inherent in my position and I fear the results would be less than satisfactory. I respect their knowledge and ability as professionals and see the myriad of details they contend with everyday. Therefore, I must respect their right to chose their method of showing evidence of improved student learning, as we evaluate the effect implementation of their annual learning plan. I work hard to support them by being visible in the hallways and classrooms. Whenever possible, I address concerns expressed by parents before they impact on the teachers and students. I strive to be honest and trustworthy when dealing with my teachers and quick to help whenever I can. To this point, I have had positive comments from parents and from the teachers as to my ability in my new role. My perception that they are happy with my work as principal, may be shattered if none of them choose to engage with me in our respective research inquiries.

Conclusion

I have explained my process and my reasons for preparing to introduce the action research process to teachers at my school. Philosophically, I must

work to my own values and listen to the voices of others. Students and teachers must feel comfortable enough to risk, yet experience a bit of discomfort or tension to move on or grow. Finding that balance, as a facilitator, is difficult. Although the systematic reflection and action cycle is not necessarily natural for teachers, I do believe in the worth of the process because I have witnessed the resulting empowerment. As my inquiry moves on, I will be exploring the quality of the extent of my educational influences as I encourage teacher researchers to make their own contributions to enhancing the culture of inquiry in the school culture. I will focus on the processes of improving the means of communication between students, parents and teachers in order to improve student learning. In evaluating my own learning, I will focus my inquiries on my effectiveness in overcoming the barriers to creating a culture of inquiry in my area of responsibility as principal and my effectiveness of my influence in relation to the processes in which teachers take responsibility for their own professional development and for making their own contributions to the knowledge base of teacher research.

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